

Testimony for HB713, Revise post-adoptive services, Sponsored By: Representative Tom McGillvary.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee: For the record my name is Moe Wosepka, I currently serve as Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference. The Montana Catholic Conference is the public policy arm for the two Catholic Bishops in Montana. There are over 140,000 Catholics in the two Diocese statewide.

For the past 10 years I worked for Good Samaritan Ministries in Helena. Our ministry was to the poor and homeless, the forgotten in our nursing homes, and the ignored in our prisons and jails. It is from this perspective that I speak to you today.

In Catholic Social teaching we recognize a Preferential Option for the poor. We feel the basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. Our tradition instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

My work at the Good Samaritan was dedicated to that cause with maybe a little different approach than others. Our focus was on finding ways to help our clients get back into the work force, and build self esteem and value through constructive activities. We understood that many of those we worked with were under employed because they lacked education, training, transportation, and support. Many did not have even the basic skills needed to hold a job and improve their position in life. We believe that giving someone an opportunity to improve themselves through work was the best way to independence from welfare.

Our mission statement came in part from our own action. Our Thrift Store had annual revenues of over \$800,000 and employed 33 people with an annual payroll of over \$300,000. Using that model and other models we studied from around the country, The Delancy Street Program in San Francisco, and Pioneer Human Services in Seattle, we began to look at transitional living programs for ex-offenders from our prison system. Snow plowing business, a restaurant, and even purchasing an office building downtown. They would live there and be the operational and maintenance persons while pursuing their education and life skills development.

During this time I discovered another group that was falling through the cracks. These were ladies who had placed their babies through adoption agencies. The young ladies who were in this group that I worked with were low income, most if not all undereducated and most teenage and living at home. There were just like the other young ladies who came to me for help, except they were pregnant.

Most of these young ladies had never had a full time job. They were teenagers living at home. They were having difficulties in school for many reasons. They were certainly lacking parenting skills.

They of course had three options: Abortion, Parenting, or Adoption. Of those I talked to most decided to parent. Some would tell me the reason was because of pressure from parents and peers. Other would say if they parent they would get their own apartment, a cash allowance, food stamps, health care, and other state benefits. These benefits are not available if they place their baby for adoption. We all know the reason for this. The reason is that these state benefits are for the child not adults. And rightly so.

But they still had the hurt. These young ladies who placed their baby suffered a huge loss. A loss that none of us who haven't been there will fully understand. And it appeared to me that they were set aside. They were no longer the center of attention that had been when they were pregnant, and especially so as the impending birth drew near. After the birth of the child, and the relinquishment they felt they were very alone.

Now that's not totally true for some of the ladies. Those who worked through agencies like Catholic Social Services and Lutheran Social Services and other licensed agencies in Montana are given some post natal counseling. These ladies were not cast aside, and this is not the point of this legislation. Those agencies who want to provide those services should be commended, and encouraged to continue.

My concern went beyond what services were currently being provided. I was thinking again in the manner of transitional living, and jobs and improving their chances in life through advancing their education, and job training, and life skills, so when they get pregnant again they would be in a better place to care for the baby and themselves.

I wanted to buy a big old house with 8 to 10 bedrooms, and provide living quarters for 4 or 5 young ladies who placed. The other rooms could perhaps be for a bed and breakfast. We could also host meetings and serve lunches, and perhaps even develop a catering business. These ladies would be living in the facility; they would have a chance to heal from their loss. And while they were there they could develop job skills and build self esteem by working there and running the business. At the Good Samaritan, we would compliment the workers on a job well done. They would swell up with pride and achieve even greater success than anyone ever expected.

I thought it would be great to offer them scholarships. So I talked to the Knights of Columbus and Carroll College about sponsoring a scholarship. They were very receptive.

And then I went to Rosemary Miller the Director of Catholic Social Services to present my idea and to get her opinion. It was at that time that I found out what I was considering was illegal. They showed me the statute, and almost all I wanted to do was against the law in Montana. Since these young ladies had placed their child, The Good Samaritan was not allowed to offer a program that would provide educational benefits, vehicles, salary or wages, or permanent housing. We couldn't offer them the opportunity to apply for a scholarship through the KCs. We couldn't hire them to work in this bed and breakfast. And if someone donated a car to us we could give it to anyone but them. Anyone but them.

We are not talking about state funding here. We understand that state funding is for the child. We are talking about raising our own funds from our work efforts and donations. The Good Samaritan did not have any state or federal funding, not even grants. We had one small funding source from Lewis and Clark County that I turned back to the county when I went to work there. This is private money, with absolutely no thought of applying to the state for funding.

The problem is we could not offer the same help to these ladies that we could offer any other person; man, woman, or child. We could hire anyone else to work in this bed and breakfast but not a lady who placed her baby. We could provide a scholarship for a homeless person, an ex-con, but not a lady who places her baby. We could not identify a specific group of young ladies who had made one of the most difficult decisions they may ever make, and treat them as equals. It is against the law.

I understand the concern of allowing wealthy individuals to offer huge cash settlements to anyone in exchange for a baby. But this is not offering cash settlements. It is offering the same opportunities we would offer anyone else. I can't imagine anyone getting pregnant and relinquishing their baby so they can apply for a 1 or 2 or \$3,000 college scholarship.

Thank you for your time and your attention to this very important bill. It is for these reasons that the Montana Catholic Conference and the social justice efforts of the Catholic Church support this bill. We urge a do pass.

Thank you.

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